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# The Modern Language Journal

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## FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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(Read before the N. Y. State M. L. A., November 1919.)

IT is probable that in no part of American secondary school work has more progress been made in the last fifteen years than in the teaching of modern foreign languages. When the Moseley Commission from England made an exhaustive examination of our educational institutions they had much that was complimentary to say of many things they saw here, but they gave no praise that I remember to our methods of teaching French and German. Much, however, has happened since 1904 when the Commission issued its report and most of the changes that have made for improvement have emanated from just such associations as this. Conscious of defects in their work, unsparing of themselves in their efforts to make it better, progressive enough to try out constructive suggestions, teachers of your subjects have, in the main, been responsible for such improvement that "E'en the ranks of Tuscany could scarce forbear to cheer."

A genuine conviction that this is true does not add at all to the assurance of one who is not a teacher of modern languages when he ventures to speak to you of your special work. He can plead only as extenuation for his temerity in addressing you a second invitation from your president and a genuine desire to hear experts like yourselves discuss some conclusions that have been forced upon him in his observation of secondary school administration and class room teaching. With the first of the conclusions I know you will agree. There will be no discussion about it. It is that, although it must be conceded by all critics that very

marked improvement has been effected by you in your work, there is still room for much more.

We have not yet learned to think in terms dissociated from the reaction of the war. It is more than likely that our generation never will. It seems to me most desirable that we should not. There is no aspect of our life and work that the war has not affected. It has wrought incalculable ill and some good. Peradventure when the colossal magnitude of the thing has receded far enough in point of time for losses and gains to be seen in their true perspective, the good that seems so small today may be found to overshadow the largely looming ill. A single lesson of the fiery trial, if it could be laid to heart by humanity, would go far toward the prevention of all future wars—the lesson of the futility and wrongfulness of waste—waste of human life, waste of time, energy and material. The inevitable suffering caused by disregard of this lesson has brought its importance home with telling force to thoughtful men in all walks of life in every land. To no man, however, should the wanton wickedness of any, even the slightest, responsibility for preventable waste come with such compelling power as to the teacher. To the factory owner waste of time, energy, and material is a calamity, but when for material we substitute the lives of our boys and girls, when their energy means the sharp edged tool with which they carve a place for themselves in their environment, and time the short period of preparation allowed to them to fit themselves for their life work, waste of these things is not only a calamity but criminal. It is the realization of this that is causing men and women of our profession all over the world to consider ways and means of eliminating such waste with a new sincerity and earnestness. When the survey is made, no department of our secondary school course will, I think, be held blameless—not even your department. We are not concerned with other departments today but with yours, we are. If there *is* any serious waste in the teaching of modern language, you are the people who can reduce it to a minimum. If there is waste *you* will be the first to wish to eliminate it. I am glad, therefore, to get an opportunity to say to such an audience that, in my judgment, there is waste—very considerable waste—in modern language teaching in American schools. The indictment, if made at all,

ought to be made more specific in its charges and I will endeavor to make it so.

The study of modern languages in our high schools has had a most remarkable growth within the memory of men now not very old. I think I am correct in saying that it was as late as 1875 before any American college made a modern foreign language a required subject for entrance credit. Now almost every college requires the study of one or possibly two foreign languages for periods of two or three years in the high school.

In thinking of possible waste in your work I have not, however, the college entrance group so much in mind as that far greater group of boys and girls who are not going to enter higher institutions of learning, but who, nevertheless, are spending from one fourth to one half of their time in high school in foreign language study. Unfortunately, the time the average high school student is enrolled falls far short of four years. By the middle of the second year from the time of their admission almost half of any entering class will have dropped out from large city high schools, and in the end probably, at a liberal estimate, not more than thirty per cent of those who entered remain to be graduated. Let us think first of the seventy per cent who do not remain to complete their course. Of what value has their foreign language study been to them? Well, in the first place, it is possible that many of them in these days of comparatively free election did not take a foreign language at all. But a very large majority of them will have done so—so large a majority that it behooves us to examine very carefully the results of our work with them. I confess that my consideration of their cases convinces me that *we are attempting to teach modern foreign language to far too many boys and girls* and by so doing are crowding out from their course subjects which would be, for them, of greater benefit.

Our aim in teaching modern language is cultural or vocational or else a combination of the two aims. Let us consider first the vocational aim. Our people is one which is far removed from the countries where the languages we teach are spoken. Their vocational use of foreign language is to facilitate the business of commerce with these lands—a very important object indeed, of course, and one for which a considerable number of young men and young women should be most carefully prepared, but will one in

five, will one in twenty to whom we are now teaching a language, nominally for vocational ends, ever use vocationally the knowledge he has acquired? I fear the answer must be in the negative and confession made that American vocational use of modern foreign languages does not and will not justify the extent to which we teach them, avowedly for that end. Do not mistake me. Foreign language should—nay, must be, to some extent—taught for vocational use. My point is that of all the thousands who have of late years undertaken the study of a language for vocational ends—Spanish for example—comparatively very few, a few hundreds at most, will ever reap the vocational advantages hoped for from their knowledge of Spanish. The students who are engaged in vocational language study are in most cases to spend their lives in callings in which other studies—a thorough training in English, industrial history, economics, commercial geography, business administration—would supplement the other elements of a fairly good commercial course more profitably than such a knowledge of French, German or Spanish as is to be acquired in two or three years of high school instruction. It seems to me that one of the most important fields of investigation that Associations of Modern Language Teachers could undertake is the determination of the extent to which a knowledge of French, Spanish, or German is really required in the conduct of American business.

Since it is clear that some students must be encouraged to undertake the study of modern languages, another equally important step in the same general direction would be the consideration and formulation of general tests by which language ability might be discovered, or the lack of it demonstrated, in boys and girls of about fourteen years of age. I believe that the day is not very far distant when this kind of test will be evolved for other subjects in our curriculum—particularly for mathematics and science—and I can see no insurmountable difficulty in devising tests that would be helpful in deciding whether to advise election of a foreign language or not.

Language training involves cultivation of the memory, the ear, and the processes of analytical and comparative judgment. Now the faculties of memory, of hearing correctly, and of making judgments, are in some degree native to all normal human beings but they vary greatly in their degree of native intensity. To some degree

they may all be sharpened and improved by proper training, but good training will do very much more and do it much more rapidly for young people who possess these qualities naturally in a marked degree than it will for those who do not. If we could learn how to decide that in the case of any given student the faculty of memory, of hearing correctly; or of forming comparative judgment was very decidedly below the average, we could with good reason advise against a language election in his case. Our advice might not be welcome; it might not be accepted by some parents; but at least having given it sincerely on evidence presented, our responsibility in the matter would have been discharged. At present it seems to me we are not discharging it properly. So long as our aim is frankly vocational it will be conceded, I think, that we should not occupy the time of twenty or thirty students in the study of a subject which may be of vocational use to perhaps but two or three of them. So far as vocational ends are concerned, we should divert from language courses those whose linguistic ability is distinctly weak, and we should find a way to do it before their own repeated failure has wasted too much of their precious time. If our aim be cultural, either in commercial or general courses, the problem, to my mind, becomes very much more complicated. In this case, the vocational aim being secondary, or even non-existent, there is some show of reason for deliberately attempting to cultivate linguistic ability even in students notably lacking in native qualities that seem indispensable for successful study of a foreign language.

Briefly, I suppose that the cultural value of a modern language lies chiefly in its power to help us to understand, through the medium of that language, the literature, history, customs, and complex modern life of the nation that speaks it, and to enable us to compare them with our own literature, history and national life in such a manner that each, to some degree at least, illumines the other. There is, in addition, the distinct benefit of a certain amount of ear and memory training, together with repeated opportunities for the exercise of comparative and analytical judgment. Sometimes we are told, too, that the study of a modern foreign language assists us to a better mastery of English. To some extent this last statement may be true. A modern language, however, is not nearly so likely to be helpful in this respect as Latin, I think. We certainly should not teach it for this purpose alone.

Neither, I think, should we teach it only for its disciplinary value. It is probable that we could find other and more direct means of training the ear, memory and judgment, were that object all that we had in mind. If then our aim is not frankly vocational, it seems to me that when pressed to declare our purpose in teaching a modern foreign language, we are driven back inevitably to acknowledge that we teach it to help us to understand better all the phases of national life of another people through the medium of their own tongue. Now if this be true, and I think it is, we are face to face with the necessity of deciding what is to be the aim of our attainment.

The Committee of Twelve of the Modern Language Association of America years ago laid down for us some excellent outlines for modern language courses. Their work began a period of real progress and we are still, in the main, following their lead. Curiously enough it seems to me that the very strength of their recommendation has proved itself, in our present day adaptation of them, to be an element of weakness, for our courses, planned on the theory that a student will study a foreign language for two, three, or four years, are so arranged as to be consecutive and have in mind at least a fourfold aim all the time—to understand the spoken language, to read it, to speak it and to write it simply. At present we seem to be satisfied with the natural expectation that this fourfold aim will be realized more and more nearly as time goes on. So it is—when the student stays long enough, but you know that even with four years at your command, it is no light task that is set you and your pupils. You know, too, that comparatively few high school boys and girls of the whole number enrolling ever finish even three years' work. The consequence is that no one objective of the fourfold aim is very thoroughly attained by any but a select few of our students. I think the time has come to recognize frankly that we have need of well planned short courses in modern language in our secondary schools, and that if these courses are to be sufficiently thorough to realize to any satisfactory degree either the cultural aim or the vocational aim, that aim must not be fourfold. It will be enough to make it twofold, say the acquisition of the power to read and to pronounce the language correctly. For vocational uses, we should, I think, distinguish between students who are to translate corres-

pondence, and perhaps reply to it from some office in an American city, and those who are to proceed to the foreign country to assist in business there. In the former case the ability to speak is of secondary importance, in the latter it is of the first. Of course the ordinarily well educated man who can speak a foreign language can also write and translate it, but the training and time involved in learning to speak it are necessarily very different from the training and time involved in learning to translate correspondence and reply to it.

The gist of the matter I have been discussing is, as I see it, that very generally the aim of our present day modern language teaching is so broadly ambitious that numbers of our students do not, in the time they are under your instruction, learn to do well any one of the things they might do if we instituted for them short courses in which the aim should be the thorough accomplishment of say two of the four abilities: to read, to write, to understand the spoken language, and to speak it. It seems to me that these courses should be freely offered for cultural as well as vocational purposes to those students who showed, by the test we spoke of, a special aptitude for language. I cannot see why a course in conversation and translation into the foreign language could not succeed a reading course, for instance, in cases where a student is going to remain long enough in school to take it. Those who had had the reading course, but who could not take the other, would at least have had a *better* reading course than now.

These suggestions will be regarded, doubtless, by some of you as so reactionary that I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and declare myself at once to be one of those antediluvians who believe in the usefulness of the study of English grammar and in the practicability of teaching the simple essentials of it to children of elementary school age in such a way that they positively understand and like it. I believe that it is certainly necessary to teach the fundamentals in order to prevent the waste caused by confusion and failure in the earliest stages of foreign language study. To qualify for foreign language election I would make a sound knowledge of the simplest kind of English grammar a preliminary requirement, and test it in the examination I advocated to discover linguistic ability. And here a remark by the way. It is high time surely that we *did* something about a common nomen-



clature for grammatical terms in all language teaching, English included. We have talked long enough about it, but the same differences still exist very generally that first led to discussion of the subject. I begin to fear that my talk sounds as though I were finding fault on a wholesale scale; far be it from me to do so. I have not forgotten what I said about improvement in your work and I meant what I said. I have not forgotten that we have advanced from the reading method of James Hamilton through the natural method of Gouin to a reformed method that is much better for our use than either of them. I know of no classroom work more exacting or exhausting than good foreign language teaching. You men and women who do it have my admiration and my sympathy and I would have you mark well the fact that, so far as I have gone, I have dealt with the elimination of waste that might in my judgment be effected rather by changes in administration than by changes in teaching method.

Now, however, I am going to venture inside the classroom with you and speak of some things that need improvement there. Again they are things having to do with administration more than method, but being conditions continually under your eye, you must shoulder a large part of responsibility for improving them if you find you are in agreement with me about them.

In the first place if we are really to prevent waste, your recitation classes are generally far too large. That is not your fault. It is your misfortune, but it is much more disastrously the misfortune of the students enrolled in them.

In your subject above all others—at least in courses in which it is attempted to cultivate an ability to understand the spoken language and to enable students to express themselves simply in it—it is vitally important that the size of classes should permit of frequent recitation by individual students.

To teach modern foreign languages to fewer students in the aggregate and to teach them more intensively to fewer students in the recitation group would in the end, I believe, make for an increased knowledge of those languages measured absolutely.

Whatever may be the aim or aims in the classroom, a very large part of the work must be based upon reading. This makes it highly important that the right kind of reading matter should be selected. The vocabulary to be gained is of course fundamentally

important. But that is not all. The reading matter should be so chosen that the student is sufficiently interested in it to want to read it. It has often seemed to me that the books selected were either very much too simple in their thought content or else very much too difficult. Children of fourteen or fifteen years of age, I think, find very little of real interest in reading French or German fairy tales. They do not themselves at that age usually choose such stories for their own English reading.

Too often, I fear, a rather ambitious ideal to arouse literary appreciation in pupils, who have not yet acquired any such appreciation even of English literature, is responsible for the selection of reading matter that, in its thought content, is as far above the capabilities and interests of beginners as the fairy tales or similar children's stories are below them. The reading of a passage in the foreign tongue is, it seems to me, very frequently so lacking in expression that it loses nearly all its value. All of you I am sure are familiar with that curiously staccato, unpunctuated, or wrongly punctuated, and hesitating habit of reading that I have in mind. I think that really good teaching should always insist that intelligent expression in reading the passage in the foreign language is a most important step toward an acceptable translation of it. When a written translation has been made and corrected, it might with great advantage far more frequently be used for translation back into the foreign language than now seems very generally to be the case. This would save a certain amount of time, help to fix vocabulary, and give exercise in the appreciation of the principles of grammar and the use of idiom that had been discussed in class when the English translation was being made and criticized. It goes without saying of course that this should be a class room exercise only.

The plentiful use of material that tends to make the foreign country real—photographs of places and people, a foreign newspaper, a magazine, a current events bulletin board, should I think be far more generally found in recitation rooms than they are at present. Directly along this line of making the language really a living one, there is another aid to its acquisition available for every teacher's use, an aid which is utilized by only a few. I refer to the natural instinct in children for dramatization. A short scene rendered dramatically from the reading they are

doing—it need not take more than a few minutes to do it—will produce a lively interest in the work and aid greatly in improving oral expression. It will help to fix phrases and idioms in mind perhaps more effectively than any other method. This kind of thing is to be done of course without any elaboration. It may be that parts are read only, but even in that case, the fact that the students are taking individual parts at once improves the reading greatly.

The use of English in the class room is of course in these days reduced to a minimum wherever properly qualified teachers are in charge, but that minimum must not be less than will suffice to make principles perfectly clear: otherwise an explanation of grammar or syntax in the foreign language may fail entirely of its object for a majority of the class. Hence it follows that clear and fluent English is an essential qualification for a successful teacher of foreign languages. And so after all, whatever be the phase of teaching we discuss, we come back eventually to the personality and equipment of the teacher and ever more like the tent maker of old, "Come out by that same door wherein we went." All depends upon the teacher and I cannot leave my subject without speaking briefly of him—or her, I should say, in days when men engaged in teaching seem doomed to share the fate of the dodo in its fight against an unfavorable environment.

In spite of the fact that the three best teachers of modern foreign languages I have ever known were German, Swiss, and French respectively by birth, I am of the opinion that the teacher of modern foreign languages in American schools should—if we are to attain the largest and most general measure of success possible—be native born Americans.

It seems to me to be of vital importance that he who teaches the beginning of a foreign tongue to American boys and girls should realize instinctively the difficulties and mental processes of comparison and contrast that inevitably present themselves to English speaking youth when learning a new language. I very much doubt if these difficulties can be foreseen or met as readily by one whose native language is not English as by one whose language it is. The chief objection that can be raised against the native born American is the possibility or probability that, except in rare instances, his mastery of the foreign language is not as thorough

as it should be. This objection, when it is justified, is of course a fatal one, and the only remedy for it is improved training for modern language teachers in our colleges and—more important than anything else perhaps—a sufficiently long residence abroad to enable the would-be teacher to acquire the niceties of pronunciation and idiom that can scarcely be acquired in any other way, but which are absolutely necessary to the best work. What I have said about school teachers of foreign languages being natives does not at all apply, I think, to college instructors or professors. It is necessary for the latter to do a grade of work that the native born teacher is only rarely qualified to do. In the colleges, in the case of prospective teachers of foreign languages, and others who may be specializing intensively in them, the instructor or professor is dealing with students who have presumably passed beyond the initial stages of their work, and who are ready to profit by what, in general, only one whose native language is the language they are studying can give them.

In conclusion, all that I have said is prompted by the conviction that at present there is a very considerable amount of waste in our modern language teaching and that now, of all times, is the best time to begin a serious effort to eliminate it. To attain this purpose I think we need a clearer definition of our aims in teaching a foreign language, whether for vocational or for cultural ends. Particularly ought we to weigh more carefully the real probability of the vocational use of a modern foreign language by very large numbers of our students who are studying it nominally for that end. To obtain reliable data for this estimate, a survey should be made of the actual commercial need of modern foreign languages in American commerce. We might, I think, determine by properly set tests those who are likely to excel or to fail in language study, and advise for or against election accordingly. We could, with advantage, institute short courses more or less complete in themselves and having a less complicated, more definite and less ambitious objective than seems to be the case at present. A fair grounding in very simple English grammar should be insisted upon as a prime requisite for all foreign language study. Recitation classes should be smaller than is now usually the case and more thoughtful care given to the selection of reading material in order that it may be neither too infantile nor too difficult in

thought content. Interest in the work may be strengthened by an increased use of material for supplementary visual instruction touching upon the everyday life of the foreign people, and by utilizing occasionally the dramatic instinct of children in the classroom.

Finally, I advocate the proper preparation and the employment of American born teachers for secondary school foreign language work—but they should be in almost every case prepared in part by residence abroad.

I sincerely believe that the adoption of these suggestions would make for the reduction of waste of time and effort on the students' and on the teachers' part in modern language work in our secondary schools.

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